

FLORIDA HOUSE  
20 & 23 South Third Street  
Fernandina Beach  
Nassau County  
Florida

HABS No. FL-356

HABS  
FLA,  
45-FERB,  
3-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FLORIDA HOUSE

HABS No. FL-356

Location: 20 & 23 South Third Street, Fernandina Beach, Nassau County, Florida.

Present Owner: Samuel W. Sayler, Jr.

Present Occupant: Tenants.

Present Use: Rooming house.

Significance: The Florida House is typical of the boarding house type of hotel of the late nineteenth century. It was considered to be one of the most "home-like" hotels in Florida.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Ca. 1857-1859. Local tradition has it that the Florida Railroad built the Florida House around 1861. (Seibert) However, it appears from deeds that there was some kind of structure on the site as early as 1859. In addition, there was an increase in the purchase price of the site from \$300 in 1857 to \$2,500 in 1859. This indicates that the structure was probably built sometime during the above dates. (See "Original and subsequent owners" below.)
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Florida House was constructed on lots 7 through 9 of Block 13 of the official plat of the City of Fernandina which was lithographed and issued by the Florida Railroad in 1857 and enlarged, revised, and reissued by the Florida Town Improvement Company in 1887 and 1901. The chain of title is drawn from the Deed Books and Mortgage Records of Nassau County, Florida:

1857 Deed, March 4, 1857, recorded April 1, 1857 in Book F, page 107. Lot 9 of Block 12 was sold for \$300 by Trustees of Florida Railroad Company to Peter Gill Peterson.

1858 Lease, March 24, 1857, recorded April 1, 1857 in Book F, page 109. A 99 year lease on lot 8 of Block 13 was granted at a rate of \$24.00 per year by Trustees of Florida Railroad to Peter Gill Peterson.

- 1859 Lease recorded February 1, 1859 in Book G, page 51.  
The above lease on lot 8 of Block 13 was assigned by  
Peter Gill Peterson  
to  
W. H. Johnson.
- 1859 Deed recorded February 9, 1859 in Book G, page 50.  
Lot 9 of Block 13 including "all buildings" was sold  
for \$2,500 by  
Peter Gill Peterson  
to  
W. H. Johnson.
- 1864 Deed recorded October 31, 1864 in Book M, page 195.  
Lots 9 and 9 of Block 13 were sold for \$300 by  
The United States of America  
to  
Tropical Manufacturing Company.
- 1869 Deed, March 15, 1869, recorded March 16, 1869 in Book  
L, page 182. Lots 8 and 9 of Block 13 were sold for  
\$1,000 by  
W. H. and M. E. Johnson  
to  
Gustav Stark.
- 1873 Deed, January 28, 1873, recorded March 31, 1873 in  
Book N, page 265. Lots 8, 9, 10, and 11 of Block 13  
were sold for \$2,600 by  
Tropical Manufacturing Company  
to  
Annie Leddy.
- 1873 Mortgage Deed, March 15, 1873, recorded March 21, 1873  
in Book O, page 61. A \$1,600 mortgage for the balance  
of purchase on lots 8, 9, 10, and 11 of Block 13 was  
taken out by  
Thomas and Annie Leddy  
to  
Tropical Manufacturing Corporation.
- 1882 Deed, July 15, 1882, recorded August 10, 1882 in Book  
T, page 145. Lot 7 of Block 13 was sold by  
Alsina A. DeForest  
to  
Joseph Higgins.

- 1901 Deed, February 4, 1901, recorded February 11, 1901 in Book A-6, page 82. Lots 6 and 7 of Block 13 were sold for \$2,100 by Joseph Higgins to Annie Leddy.
- 1901 Mortgage Deed, February 4, 1901, recorded February 7, 1901 in Book A-4, page 558. A \$900 mortgage was taken out on lots 6 and 7 of Block 13 by Annie Leddy to Joseph Higgins.
- 1905 Satisfaction of Mortgage recorded March 31, 1905 in Book 3, page 88. The above \$900 mortgage was cleared.
- 1940 Special Master's Deed, September 6, 1940, recorded September 11, 1940 in Book 110, page 461. Lots 7 through 9 were sold for \$2,200 by Thomas S. Shave, special master for Charlotte Grace Kelly (heir of Annie Leddy) to First National Bank of Fernandina.
- 1940 Mortgage Deed, recorded October 8, 1940 in Book 107, page 385. A purchase money mortgage was taken out on Lot 6 through 9 of Block 13 by Samuel W. and Cleo L. Sayler to First National Bank of Fernandina.
- 1940 Special Warranty Deed recorded October 18, 1940 in Book 110, page 492. Lots 6 through 9 of Block 13 were sold by First National Bank of Fernandina to Samuel W. and Cleo L. Sayler.
- 1940 Deed recorded December 16, 1940 in Book 112, page 43. Lot 6 through 9 were transferred by Samuel W. and Cleo L. Sayler to Samuel W. Sayler, Jr.
- 1969 Affidavit of Possession by John T. Ferreira recorded October 24, 1969 in Official Record Book 96, page 242. This certifies that Samuel W. and Cleo L. Sayler were in clear possession of lots 6 through 9 of Block 13.

- 1969      Affidavit of Possession by W. R. Wolff recorded October 24, 1969 in Official Record Book 96, page 243. This certifies that Samuel W. and Cleo L. Sayler were in clear possession of lots 6 through 9 of Block 13.
- 1970      Satisfaction of Mortgage recorded January 28, 1970 in Official Record Book 98, page 427. Satisfies the mortgage between Sayler and First National Bank.

4.      Original plans, and construction: None known. The oldest part of the Florida House is the building located at 23 South Third Street. It is the structure which is believed to have been built sometime between 1857 and 1859.

The earliest graphic record of the building is the 1884 Sanborn map. This shows a two-story frame structure approximately 45' x 40' including the front porch. There was also a small one-story wing extending east from the south end of the east side 25'. A tracing of this structure is included in "Supplementary Material."

A physical examination of the Florida House raises several doubts about the 1884 description being that of the house at originally built. In fact it seems to be very clear that the building was probably a typical ante-bellum house of the south with a central-hall, four room plan. The house probably measured 35' x 40' with a two-story porch along the west elevation and no porch on the east. (This description is conjecture and for a more detailed description of the evidence see "Alterations and additions" below.)

5.      Alterations and additions: There are several obvious conditions in the building which indicates that it was extended approximately 10' to the south at some date prior to 1884. This extension is defined by an enclosure at the south end of the west porch. The north wall of this enclosure forms a line running east through the house which was probably the original south wall. Under the house brick piers can be seen to follow the above mentioned line. These piers are just to the north of the line, indicating that they are original. At the west end of the line the pier is immediately adjacent to a second one to the south. This second pier appears to be of somewhat later date and could indicate a support for the addition. At the rear of the house a break in the clapboard siding can be seen to extend from the joist level to the cornice which is also broken. This break is also along the line where the original wall probably was located. There is also a break at the same place in the

cornice on the west side. Finally, the chimney is also located at the point where the first wall was located. All of this physical evidence has lead this author to conclude that there was indeed an addition at this point.

As for the east wing of the structure which is shown on the 1884 Sanborn map one can only guess as to whether it was added. It probably was since it lines up with the southern addition discussed above.

In 1882 the building at 20 South Third Street was built by Mrs. Joseph Higgins as an addition to the Florida House. In August of that year the Florida Mirror observed that this "popular house is to be enlarged and renovated generally, in time to accommodate next winter's travel." (Florida Mirror, August 12, 1882) In November James McGiffin a local contractor was granted the contract and commenced work on the addition which was to be "23' x 58', two-stories high, and contain some twelve rooms. It will be provided with double piazzas." (Florida Mirror, November 4, 1882) The structure was complete by 1884 because it is shown in the May 1884 Sanborn map.

The February 1891 Sanborn map shows that the east wing of the older structure was widened approximately 5' to the north and extended almost 20' to the east. A 10' x 20' extension to the south at the extreme east end of the wing was also indicated. This structure is no longer present. It is assumed that these alterations were made between 1884 and 1891 since they do not show up on the on the 1884 Sanborn map.

The 1897 Sanborn map shows that the extreme east 20' of the east wing was widened almost 9' to the north. A back porch was also added to the east end of this wing.

- B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure: Local tradition has it that when General Ulysses S. Grant was campaigning in Fernandina he was entertained by his supporters in the dining room of the Florida House. (Seibert)

The following excerpt about the Florida House appeared in 1885:

This hotel, the most accessible in the city, has been under its present proprietorship over 15 years. Every part of the house is appropriately and well furnished, and is kept exceedingly neat, clean, and orderly. Without seeming to be watched or patronized, guests are looked after with kindness and attention.... There is not a more cosey, home-like place for the weary and hungry in all Florida.... Mrs. Leddy ... has enlarged the house and increased the value of the property. (Webb, 177)

Mr. and Mrs. A. Leddy were the most well known owners of the hotel. The Leddy's came to Fernandina after the Civil War when the Major was appointed Provost Marshal of Northern Florida during the reconstruction. He and his wife, Annie, settled in the town in 1865. The Major died in 1872 of gangrene poisoning and his wife continued to run the Florida House. (Fernandina Beach News-Leader, February 5, 1959)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photograph of the west facade of the Florida House. In possession of Rudolf Williams, Fernandina Beach, Florida. n.d.

2. Primary and unpublished sources:

Florida Abstract and Title Insurance Company. "Tract Book." Fernandina Beach, Florida.

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Seibert, Nancy. Untitled manuscript concerning certain aspects of the history of Fernandina Beach. In possession of the Amelia Island Historical Society and kept at Nassau County Library, Fernandina Beach, Florida.

3. Secondary and Published Sources:

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Fernandina, Florida Mirror, August 12, 1882; November 4, 1882.

Fernandina Beach News-Leader, February 5, 1959.

Sanborn Map and Publishing Company. Fernandina Florida, May 1884. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1884. In Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida, Library East, Map Room.

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Webb, Wanton S., ed. Webb's Historical, Industrial and  
Biographical Florida. New York: Webb and Company, 1885.

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HABS-Fernandina Beach, Florida  
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ADDENDUM TO:  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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